DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 400 579 CS 509 367

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TITLE The Role of Books, Television, Computers and Video Games in Children's Day to Day Lives.
PUB DATE May 95
NOTE 26p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (Albuquerque, NM, May 25-29, 1995).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Childhood Attitudes; *Childhood Interests; Computers; Elementary Education; Grade 3; Grade 4; *Mass Media Use; Qualitative Research; *Reading Habits; *School Activities; Sex Differences; Socioeconomic Influences; Television Viewing; Video Games
IDENTIFIERS *Childrens Responses; Connecticut

ABSTRACT

A study assessed the role of various mass media in the day-to-day lives of school-aged children. Research questions dealt with the nature of children's media experiences at home, how use of media impacts school activities, the social context of media use, interior responses to different media, and whether gender or socioeconomic differences among children figure in media use. Children (all in grades 3 and 4) from opposite ends of Connecticut participated in the study. Respondents were approached through letters sent home--in the first community, children were interviewed at home, in the second community, they were interviewed at school. Children were evenly divided by sex; almost all were white. A broad array of questions was posed. Results showed that children had extensive access to media, including VCRs, cable television, and personal computers. A large number live in media-rich environments. As for media use--books are a nighttime activity, computers are used any time, and entertainment media seems to be an after-school relaxer. How media use impacts school activities is not clear, but the differences in media use among higher and lower achieving children needs to be explored in greater depth. Findings also suggest that the social contexts of media use are many and varied. (Contains 4 tables of data and 20 references.) (NKA)

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ED 400 579

THE ROLE OF BOOKS, TELEVISION, COMPUTERS AND VIDEO GAMES IN CHILDREN'S DAY TO DAY LIVES

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CS 505 367

Paper submitted to the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Instructional and Developmental Division, Albuquerque, New Mexico, May 1995

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INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

This paper presents the first findings from a research project designed to assess the role of various mass media in the day to day lives of school-aged children. The media include books, home computers, videogames and television. To date, there is no published research of this scope, in part because of rapid technological advances in interactive media in recent years.

A number of studies have examined the role of television in the day to day lives of children (eg, Himmelweit, Oppenheim and Vince, 1958; Medrich, et al.,1982), including one of the classic studies in mass communication research by Schramm, Lyle and Parker (1961) with its often quoted, qualified conclusion, "For some children, under some conditions, some television is harmful . . ." (pp. 11-12). Recently, some investigators have also examined the role of VCR's and cable in children's lives (eg, Cohen, et al., 1988; Wartella, et al., 1990; Brown, et al., 1990; Lin, 1993). There is also emerging research interest in the role and effects of video games (eg., Kubey and Larson, 1990; Wigand, et al., 1986; Gailey, 1993), especially concerning the use and effects of violent games (eg., Funk 1992; Funk and Buchman, 1994; Saxe, 1994). The use of personal computers by children has been the topic of scholarly attention regarding possible effects and suggestions for research (eg., Turkle, 1984; Paisley and Chen, 1984; Kay, 1991;) and gender differences (eg., Calvert, 1993; Chen, 1987). Finally, the role of books in the lives of children, in the sense of pleasure reading outside of

school, has been a neglected area in mass media research.

Also, research attention has not been directed at an assessment of the experience of all these various media, taken together, in the lives of American children. An examination of such issues as the amount of time spent with the different media, children's differential levels of involvement with them, the impact of their use on school performance, gender differences in usage and involvement, the social context of use of these media, and socioeconomic differences in pattern of media use which might indicate a "knowledge gap" between more and less economically advantaged families are just a few of the questions that need to be addressed.

In addition to obtaining answers to these questions, such an assessment should be an important research priority for at least two other reasons. First, the experience of media in the American culture has changed dramatically in the last several years, with rapid technological advances in personal computers and electronic video games, and the diffusion of these technologies along with VCR'S and cable into American homes. Consequently, even if a snapshot of children's experiences with these media were available a few years ago, it would be obsolete today. For example, Turkle's landmark investigation of children's experiences with computers and electronic games (1984) predated the diffusion of the Nintendo/Sega products.

Second, changes in available media experiences in the near future may be even more dramatic than those of the recent past. Our culture appears to be on the edge of an unprecedented communications revolution. The technological innovations in the areas of high definition television, CD Rom software, new generation electronic games, "virtual reality" products, and other interactive media that will emerge on the so-called information highway open up new areas of research regarding their potential impacts on people's lives.

Clearly, a benchmark study is in order as we prepare to get on this new highway, a study that will give us a snapshot of the totality of children's media experiences in the home in the mid-1990's. The information provided will be useful in its own right to address current concerns. In addition, however, this information may serve as a useful basis for comparison with similar work conducted five or ten years in the future.

This paper is part of a research project designed to address these issues. The project consists of two stages, of which the first has been completed. During stage one, the interviewing protocols have been established and assessed as to their ability to provide useful data and to obtain preliminary results. This stage consists of semi-structured, open-ended interviews with 42 children between the ages of eight and ten from two small, predominantly middle-class communities. During stage two, the project will be expanded to other, more diverse communities.

This paper provides a partial description of stage one results.

The interview format was designed to provide a bridge, so to speak, between qualitative and quantitative research procedures, as conventionally applied. In the typical qualitative research process (eg., Silverman, 1993; Crabtree and Miller, 1992), in-depth narratives of small numbers of respondents are obtained via observation or interview/conversation methods, which are then subjected to interpretative analysis by a skilled researcher. In the typical quantitive process, uniform procedures are used to obtain data from relatively large number of respondents via survey or experimental methods, which are then subjected to statistical analysis. The present study aimed to provide some of the advantages of qualitative research, which are richer, more detailed data in the respondent's own language and reflecting his or her unique perspective, while also providing some of the advantages of quantitative procedures; namely, the ability to produce findings that are more objective in the sense of being reproducible by other researchers and generalizable to the wider population.

However, these are self-report data reported by children. As one reviews the results of this process, one needs to keep in mind that the responses reflect the perceptions of the children as they answered the questions, rather than observable facts. A reliance on self-report data, especially that of a retrospective

nature, is problematic with any population and may be more so with children. Appropriate research procedures were undertaken to ensure that the children didn't feel pressured to give particular responses by interviewing them alone, and by stressing that there were no correct answers and that the interviewers were interested in their own feelings and opinions, etc.

Interviews focused on a broad range of issues relevant to children's experiences with each of the following four media: books, television, video games and computers. The issues included: amount of time spent, circumstances of use, preferences for, social contexts with family members and friends, relationships to school and homework, involvement with different media, and others.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

(1) What is the nature of children's media experiences in the home? Do they use all of these media? When do they use them? Do they have access to VCR's and cable?

(2) How does use of these media impact school activities? For example, do they carry out homework activities while simultaneously attending to television? To what extent do they use a home computer for homework assignments? To what extent do they read at home as part of a homework assignment?

(3) What is the social context of media use? Do they read books, watch television, etc. with their parents, their siblings, or

their friends? Do they discuss their experiences with others? Do they pretend play games based on media experiences?

(4) What about their interior responses to different media? To what extent do they identify with or fantasize about stories or characters that they have read about, seen on television, etc.? Which media are their favorites?

(5) What about differences among children: are there gender or socioeconomic differences among children in their use of these media? What about among children who differ in their school performance? Finally, what about differences among children who vary in number of friendships?

Because of the descriptive nature of this line of inquiry, no formal hypotheses were formulated.

PROCEDURES

Children from two communities located at opposite ends of Connecticut participated in the study. The first community is a semi-rural town in Northeastern Connecticut located near two state universities. The second is a small rural town located in the hills of Northwestern Connecticut.

Respondents were approached via letters sent home through the schools. In the first community, they were interviewed at home, while in the second community, they were interviewed in their school. All respondents were in third or fourth grade, aged

between eight and ten. Half were male and half female. Almost all respondents were white.

The one-on-one interviews were conducted by the author and three research assistants. Each interview lasted approximately a half-hour. No parents were present in the room in the cases of the children interviewed at home.

The interviewers asked a series of questions to obtain information about the respondent's family, friendships and activities, including number of adults in the home, number of siblings, number of close friends, number of after-school activities the child was engaged in, and occupation of parents. The fathers'occupations subsequently were coded according to Duncan's socioeconomic index (Miller, 1983) as an indicator of family socioeconomic status. Separately, information was obtained from the respondents' teachers about their academic performance, specifically, their math and reading levels.

The remaining questions concerned the child's media experiences. Each of the four media was taken one at a time, with the order rotated so that each medium was assessed in each of four positions (first, second, third, fourth) approximately equally. Some of these questions were closed-ended, eg., "Do you have a personal computer at your house?". Others were designed to probe the child's experience with or level of involvement with the medium, and to encourage the child to talk about his or her experienc,

eg., "Do you ever think about shows or characters that you've seen on TV? You know, kind of like daydreaming? Tell me about it".

At the end of the interview, respondents were asked a series of questions that compared media, such as, "Which is your favorite? Why?", and "What about if some of your friends came over to play. Which of these are you most likely to use with your friends?".

In summary, a broad array of questions was posed to each respondent. Some of these were designed to just describe the respondents' media experiences and their social context. Others were attempts to get at the respondents' involvement with each medium.

The results presented in this paper concern the children's responses to the closed-ended questions.

RESULTS

Description of Sample

The respondents varied in age from eight to ten. Fifty percent of the sample was male; 50% female. 93% were White, 2% Hispanic, and the rest were unidentified. The majority of respondents had only one sibling (63%) or were only children (7%). Eighty-six percent were living in two-parent households. In short, while these respondents may not reflect the diversity of racial groups and family lifestyles that exist in present-day America, they do reflect traditional norms and will provide an appropriate and interesting group for comparison purposes.

Experience with Books

Table 1 shows that 95% of all respondents reported that they read books for fun, with 67% reporting having done so on the previous day. On average, they read for 47 minutes the previous day. Few of them report having to read stories for homework (70% responded rarely or never). Of the children who reported having read the previous day, 63% said they did so alone, while 16% said they did so with someone else, in most cases a parent (75%). Half (49%) of the children said that someone had read to them in the past week, usually a parent. A large majority (88%) reported that someone read to them when they were too young to read for themselves, with over half (56%) reporting that this occurred every day or almost every day. A large majority (84%) again reported that they see their parents reading to themselves, although the

frequency of seeing their parents read varied considerably.

In response to a question about when they usually like to read best (Table 2), almost half (42%) said at night or before bed. No other time period of the day was nearly so popular; for example, only 14% reported preferring to read after school.

Table 3 shows that more than half (56%) of the respondents said that they and their friends tell each other about books they have read. Almost half (47%) said they pretend play stories they've read, either alone or with friends. A similar number (49%) identify with story characters, in the sense of wishing they could be like the characters, and a slightly larger number (54%) report that they think or daydream about stories or characters they've read about.

In summary, book reading for pleasure is a popular activity with these children. It was and still is an activity they do together with their parents, even though they are all able to read alone. Furthermore, it appears to provide stimulation for subsequent cognitive, play and conversational activities for at least half of the respondents.

Experience with Television

Almost all (98%) of respondents reported having at least one television in the home; 68% said that they have two or more sets.

Sixty-four percent of respondents indicated that they had viewed TV the previous day. The majority of respondents live in homes with VCR's (88%) and cable access (77%). When asked when they most like to watch television, the largest group (35%) said after school or afternoons. In contrast, only 19% said that they usually like to watch TV best at night. It appears, then, that television fills a different spot in children's day to day routines than books.

As with books, TV appears to be a fertile ground for stimulating conversations, play activities and imagination. A large majority (81%) of the children said that they talk about TV shows with friends. Half (49%) said that they pretend play TV shows, either alone or with friends. Forty percent said that they think or daydream about TV shows or characters, while one-third (33%) said there was a TV character that they wished they could be like.

Among the children who had viewed television the previous day, the majority (63%) watched with other people, either their siblings (50%) or parents (13%). Children with siblings were also asked who among them usually chooses the program to watch when they view together. Approximately equal numbers say that they choose, that their sibling(s) choose, and that they both choose equally. A crosstabs analysis of who chooses by whether or not the siblings are older or younger revealed no significant differences.

Children were asked whether their families have rules about watching television. Sixty-one percent reported that their families do have such rules. Of these, 27% said that they have time limits on viewing, and 18% indicated particular program restrictions (eg., not allowed to watch "Salute Your Shorts"). Thirty percent said both time and program restrictions. Twelve percent said that they weren't allowed to watch TV until their homework was completed, and nine percent said that TV privileges were taken away as punishment.

Homework

Respondents were asked about the last time that they had homework to do. The interviewers asked them where they did their homework. Almost half (47%) said in the kitchen. Twenty-six percent indicated their bedroom, and nine percent said the family room or livingroom. Twelve percent indicated that the television was on in the room while they did their homework.

Video Games

Just over half of the respondents (56%) have nintendo or sega systems at home. Of the 37% who do not, one-third said that they play the games at someone else's house. Only 11% of users reported having played the games on the previous day, for an average of 60 minutes. Nineteen percent of the sample said that they prefer to play video games after school, while 14% reported that they like to play when they're bored or have nothing else to do.

When asked whether they prefer to play alone or with a friend, twice as many respondents (44%) indicated that they'd rather play with a friend than alone (21%). Finally, users were asked whether either of their parents play video games. Forty-two percent indicated that they do.

Thirty-eight percent of the users said that they talk about video games with their friends. Twenty-four percent said that they pretend play about video games, and 21% said that they think or daydream about video games. (Respondents were not asked about identification with characters for video games, because of the low level of realism of current games).

Computers

Sixty-five percent of the respondents have personal computers in their homes. All of these respondents said that they play computer games on their home computers. Thirty-one percent of those with computers said that they used their computer yesterday. Of these, the vast majority (82%) said that they used it to play games. Only a very few respondents indicated others uses, such as doing homework or using a wordprocesser. Nevertheless, 45% of computer users said that they do use the computer for homework assignments. In most cases (83%), the children said that they used the computer by themselves, while 17% used it with others. When asked when they prefer to use the home computer, 24% of the users said at night, 21% said after school, and 21% said anytime. Eighty-one percent of the total sample use computers in school,

primarily for typing stories (52%).

Approximately one-third of the users (31%) said that they talk about computer games with their friends. A smaller number (21%) said that they sometimes think or daydream about computer games. (Respondents were not asked about pretend play activities or identification with characters for computers).

Comparisons of the Four Media

Following these questions, respondents were presented with pictures of all four media, and were given a series of situations for which they could select only one. For example, the first situation asked, "If you were going somewhere and could only take one of these, which one would you choose? Why?" The closed-ended results are described in Table 4. Children said they spend the most time with books and television, but that they'd be most likely to choose video games or computers if they were with their friends. If they were by themselves, tney'd be most likely to choose books or the computer. Predictably, perhaps, they said they'd learned the most from books. Books were also rated as the favorite of the four media by the largest number of respondents.

Group Differences

The last set of results concern differences among children in their media activities. A series of simultaneous multiple regression analyses was performed to determine whether respondent

differences in gender, school performance (based on reading and math levels), socioeconomic status (based on father's occupation) or number of friends (names mentioned by respondent) predicted responses to the four activities influenced by media (talk about, play, identify with, think about). Similar analyses were performed to determine whether these individual differences predicted use of video games or home computers.

Most of these analyses resulted in nonsignificant effects, except for the significant relationships summarized below.

Gender did not predict any media activity.

School performance predicted (negatively) whether respondent has video games (beta=-.39, t=-2.52, sig.=.017); that is, the higher the school performance, the less likely they were to say they have video games. School performance also predicted whether the respondent thinks about computer games (beta=.41, t=2.26, sig.= .034); the higher the school performance, the more likely the child was to say he or she thinks about/daydreams about computer games.

Socioeconomic status predicted whether the child identifies with television characters (beta of .34, t=2.14, sig.=.04). The higher the status, the more likely the child is to identify. It approached significance in its prediction (negative) of whether the child said he or she uses the computer for homework (beta of

-.39, t=-1.99, sig.=.059). The higher the status, the less likely the respondent was to use the computer for homework.

Number of friends predicted negatively whether the respondent identifies with television characters (beta of -.47, t=-3.09, sig.=.004), whether the child has video games (beta of -.40, t=-2.5, sig.=.018), whether the child pretend-plays about video games (beta of -.44, t=-2.11, sig.=.047). This variable approached significance in its prediction of whether the child thinks about computer games (beta=-.38, t=-1.92, sig.=.069). The children who mentioned more friends were less likely to say they identify with television characters, have video games, pretend-plays video games, or think about computer games.

DISCUSSION

Although no formal hypotheses were tested, several research questions were posed earlier in this paper. The following discussion will describe what we have learned about these questions. Also, consistent with the ongoing nature of this project, suggestions will be made as to what information needs to be augmented in the next stage of this project.

What is the nature of children's media experiences?

We've learned that these children have extensive access to all four media, as well as VCR's and cable. The high number who have access to personal computers at home and at school is surprising. A large number of them live in media-rich environments. The

primary question for the future, of course, is whether this level of media access holds true for children from less advantaged environments. The issue of a possible "knowledge-gap", particularly between children who grow up around computers and those who do not, needs to be investigated. This project minimally needs to document differences.

The differential pattern of media use during the course of the day (Table 2) is interesting, in that the four media are quite distinctive in this regard. Books are very much of a nighttime/before bed activity for many children, whereas television and video games seem to be preferred after school in the afternoon. In contrast, there seems to be no special time of the day that children prefer to use computers. These differences may simply speak to habit: the habit of reading before bedtime, or the habit of relaxing with entertainment media after school. On the other hand, they may also speak to somewhat different functions served. Again, it will be interesting to see if similar patterns emerge with different demographic groups, and to probe a bit more about why such differences occur.

How does media use impact school activities?

This area is the least successfully addressed in the present study. Few of these respondents indicated that they did homework with the television on, although there may be social demand operating with this question. Quite a few said they do use their computers for homework, but almost no one admitted to doing so

yesterday. Very few children said that they get reading assignments as homework. (However, it's likely that many teachers make general recommendations to read, which are not interpreted as "homework"). The differences in media use among higher and lower achieving children needs to be explored in greater depth. The regression analyses suggested a few differences, which a larger and more variant sample will help to clarify. Additional questions probing links between school and media use ought to be developed.

What is the social context of media use?

The short answer to this question is: many and varied. All four media are used to some extext in social contexts. Books are very much social media for these children, in terms of reading with family members, talking about books with friends, and pretend playing about stories and story characters. The number of children of this age group who still read with their family is surprising. This is another area that will be most interesting to explore with a more diverse sample.

Television is also a very social medium, although this is a less surprising finding. Television more than other media holds social utility for children as a conversation topic with their friends. And they watch television with their family members, but don't like to do so when their friends are visiting.

The social aspects of video and computer games need to be explored with a larger sample. As media that explicitly include multiple players, they seem to be naturals for social use. We have a bit of evidence of this from these respondents who say that they would be most likely to choose video games with friends. Also, the finding that almost half of video game users' parents also play video games implies a social connection.

What are the interior responses to different media?

The two specific questions that explore internal responses worked well, in the sense that the respondents seemed comfortable and uninhibited about responding. In general, the methodological challenge of how to get at involvement with media among any users, but especially children, continues to be difficult. The present attempt is admittedly limited and preliminary. However, involvement is an important intervening variable that helps to explain learning, behavior change and a host of other media effects and therefore deserves research attention.

What are the group differences among children in media activities?

The differences predicted by school performance, socioeconomic status and breadth of friendships are interesting but preliminary and suggest that continued investigation is warranted with respondents more variant in age, race and socioeconomic status.

Finally, some general comments about the responses to books. Books are an especially popular mass medium with these children, in terms of time spent, impacts on other activities, choice as favorite medium, and so on. These results, limited though they are, are gratifying in a media environment that appears to be dominated by electronic media. Conventional wisdom suggests that we are no longer a book-reading culture. That certainly isn't true of these children. Perhaps the experiences of other groups of children are different; stage two will hopefully start to provide an answer.

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TABLE 1

PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS INDICATING MEDIA USE

	BOOKS	TV	VIDEO GAMES	COMPUTERS
HAVE/USE	95%	98%	56%	65%
USED YESTERDAY	67%	64%	11%	31%
USED WITH OTHERS YESTERDAY	16%	47%	2%	5%
USED BY PARENTS	84%	---	42%	---

TABLE 2

PERCENTAGE OF USERS WHO STATED PREFERRED TIME FOR USING MEDIUM

	BOOKS	TV	VIDEO GAMES	COMPUTERS
AT NIGHT/BEFORE BED	44%	19%	10%	24%
AFTER SCHOOL	15%	36%	28%	21%
MORNINGS	0%	12%	7%	0%
WEEKENDS	0%	14%	3%	0%
ANYTIME	17%	7%	3%	21%
OTHER	25%	12%	7%	14%

TABLE 3

MEDIA INFLUENCE ON OTHER ACTIVITIES:
PERCENTAGE RESPONSES BY USERS

	BOOKS	TV	VIDEO GAMES	COMPUTERS
TALK ABOUT	60%	83%	38%	31%
PRETEND PLAY	50%	50%	24%	---
IDENTIFY WITH CHARACTER	54%	34%	---	---
THINK/DAYDREAM ABOUT	58%	42%	21%	21%

TABLE 4

MEDIA COMPARISONS:
PERCENTAGE RESPONSES OF TOTAL SAMPLE

	BOOKS	TV	VIDEO GAMES	COMPUTERS
WOULD TAKE ON A TRIP	51%	2%	19%	26%
USE MOST OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL	40%	26%	12%	19%
MOST LIKELY TO USE WITH FRIENDS	2%	16%	44%	26%
MOST LIKELY TO USE WHEN BY MYSELF	42%	21%	9%	26%
LEARNED MOST FROM	65%	9%	5%	16%
FAVORITE	37%	7%	28%	23%